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ON BOARD THE  
*MORNING STAR*



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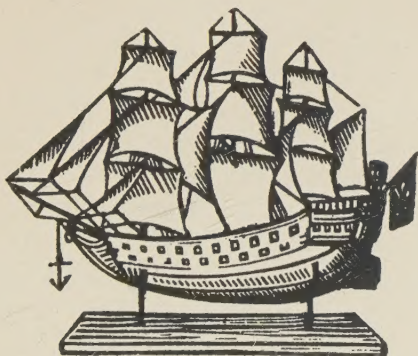
# On Board the *Morning Star*

BY

PIERRE MAC ORLAN

Translated from the French by  
MALCOLM COWLEY

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## INTRODUCTION

*It was MacGraw, the surgeon of the Morning Star, who taught me how to express my memories. He is hanging in chains at Execution Dock in London, but I render this late homage to his clear-eyed friendship.*

*MacGraw would often say: "Absolution for your crimes and redemption for your sins must be sought in your own heart."*

*It is by writing sincerely about one's life that one may obtain Divine grace. As I recount my adventures, now that they are definitely formulated on paper, my soul is emptied of everything which could disturb me. My crimes and faults, the faults and crimes of my poor comrades, the gentlemen of fortune, are here set down in this little book, and closed like a coffer whose key belongs to the world.*

*We possess our past no more. As I put a period at the end of the final page of this manuscript, it seemed that I was another man and might covet my own past as a stranger's property.*

*And in reading over the story of my life, I feel something like regret for this career which is no longer mine but that of a character in any book.*

*For this reason I shall put to sea once more, beginning another life of adventures like the first so as to be able, at the proper time, to efface these memories. Thus I shall abandon my old skin on the pages of a second book, as snakes leave theirs on the flat stones of a ditch.*

*MacGraw would say at other times: "The life of a man who marches straight ahead, and should he be reborn ten times in ten better worlds, would always be the image of the first. There is only one fashion of marching straight ahead."*

*We marched ahead, we followed our noses over the sea, and when a staysail hid what we desired our knives pierced the sail, for it never entered our minds to swerve to the right or left.*

*For this reason the principal members of my band were slain, a few were hanged, and for the same reason I am alive and old, in a port of Europe, between a green parrot which insults me and a Covent Garden wench who steals my gold. I shall love the bird till the day I kill the wench, and I shall love Nancy till I strangle my green bird.*

I





## I

WHEN I was a boy I slept in the quarries near a little village which bordered the sea. The name of this village is one I cannot recall. I had neither father nor mother; I lived with obscene old men and fed myself at random, sometimes at the price of an ignoble consent.

The old men gathered in an abandoned quarry, and there devoured whatever harvest they had made. They scratched their sores, discussed their maladies and mended their rags. I cannot remember the names of any of this band. One day an old man fell into a wolf trap and I believe the others ate him. I cannot be sure. With the exception of this dead man, and I insist that the fact cannot be certified, we ate no other human flesh. But we swallowed everything which moved around us: field mice, rats, lizards, frogs and insects. The old men rushed eagerly to the chase; their hands shot out like arrows from a cross-bow. They cooked the lizards over little fires of twigs, and a few com-



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pared this viand with others whose very names were strange to me.

We also ate roots from which we stripped the bark with our knives. Then, on certain days, hard bread which we dipped in boiling broth where we had cooked a crow without its skin, for the skin of crows is bitter.

By the age of twelve I had eaten everything which men had never eaten, but I could not imagine the food of other men, and as I lived far from cities, I desired nothing.

One day, perhaps I was fourteen, I saw a woman at the corner of a wood, near a field where I was stalking a flock of crows.

She was young, about fifteen: a peasant girl with fresh cheeks, common features, heavy blond hair and a coif which was extremely white.

The scope of my imagination was too narrow for comparing her to a princess, but I believed her, such as she was, to possess a little of the divine. I took a crow which I had killed with my sling, and stepping in front of her to bar the path, I put the dead bird in her arms.

"Here," I said, "This is for you." And I fled across the fields.

When I came to the quarry the old men were quarrelling with little puerile gestures.

"It is my place. . . The place is mine."

"You lie, dog."

"My place, by God's beard."

A stick clacked on a dry head.

The old man wailed like a child and gave up his place. Blood dripped on his bruised cheeks. He died during the night.

As for me, crouching in a dark corner, I thought of this splendid girl whose astonishing freshness was a quality beyond my power to define. Indeed, I had never seen a girl so healthy and so young.

I waited for her next day at the corner of the wood. She passed without turning her head. On the third day she walked toward me deliberately. She carried soup in a covered earthenware dish. The soup was still warm. I threw myself on this nourishment and lapped it with my tongue, like a dog.

Every day my new friend passed the edge of the wood. Sometimes she brought me soup, sometimes bread and smoked pork, walnuts, or a hard cheese covered with hay.

It happened one time, the conversation of the old men having troubled my imagination by giving it a definite goal, that I awaited the girl with impatience, knowing what I desired.

When she came to bring me bacon and bread—the fields deserted as far as the horizon favored my desires—I took her roughly by the arm, and with my other hand I tried to lift her skirts.

She cried out and, suddenly, her face grew ugly with fear. A formidable anger flamed in my eyes. I sprang on her as on a prey, strangling her in accordance with the laws of the chase. When she was motionless between my hands, I opened my fingers and she fell, soft and heavy, on the grass.

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"Now I'll have no more soup," I thought. I returned to the quarries, and naturally I told the story to the old man who shared my mattress of dry leaves.

He uttered a sort of bark and roused the sleepers.

"This miserable brigand has killed one of the village girls. What will become of us? He has sowed the seeds of destruction in our band."

While they gathered in the darkness to decide how they should deliver me to the law, I fled.

And I ran straight ahead, toward the sea, galloping over the frozen soil.

It was only after a great space of years, and after reading many books, that the adventure returned to my memory in its true importance. I mean that long afterwards I discovered, as if by revelation, that I had committed a crime and thus, in the flower of my age, was the gallows' debtor to a value not exceeding my own life.









## II

WHEN I consider the miserable stupidity of my youth, my heart beats quicker and the blood drums in my ears. Is every child, like me, an imbecilic creature incapable of choosing between the evils which must be destroyed and the good things to be respected? I do not know. Other children would not slay the wench they loved, who gave them bread, but they sacrifice the little domestic beasts which offer them ingenuous caresses. When the call of the angel trumpets sounds, tell me which shall be pardoned by his Judge: the naked child that drags his little strangled cat and his ruptured frogs at the end of a string, or the savage gentleman of fortune with his burlesque procession of human victims?

Indeed we were cruel, as cruel as big children.

Till the age of fifteen I remained in the darkness, like a little beast whose eyes were still closed. And it was at Brest that I first saw the light of the world, in a tavern where I was helping the servant girls.

There I listened to a discontented soldier. He was called Muguet: a heavy man with short legs and thick calves where the stockings were always slipping down. He belonged to an infantry battalion, but he served as sharpshooter on the *la Murène* frigate of 40 guns. In those days the infantry went to sea, aiding with the work on deck during the voyage, but Muguet also served aloft, gaining a monthly supplement of three livres. He was considered a man of means and would often stand treat to a pitcher of claret.

The inn where I helped to wash the bottles, chop wood and turn the spit was situated on a narrow street near the arsenal. The guests at the sign of the *Fireship* were the sailors and petty officers of the fleet, and sergeants or corporals from the infantry battalion assigned to marine service.

These gentry drank up their pay and sang with the wenches. In moments of sobriety they leaned their heads sadly between their hands and stared at the bottle. Some could only speak of the hardships of their trade. Others related their adventures on the other side, in the promised lands of America, but all retained the respect of discipline. When they were drunk they sang melancholy airs in the manner of the Bretons. I could hear the sharp voices of their wenches trilling the sailor chanteys, like lightnings in a suffocating night.

For myself, on the margin of this idyllic life, I would plunge my bare arms into a bucket of sour-smelling water. From time to time a drunken sailor reeled into the courtyard to make water. They leaned their

foreheads against the wall; and afterwards, when they stumbled back to the warm taproom, their fingers would fumble over the stones to find the door.

The operation of washing pitchers and bottles leaves the imagination free. In my imagination the limits of the world hardly extended beyond the littered street and the taproom with its gilt and its haze of golden smoke which enveloped every face with mystery.

I forget my master's name. Among his guests I remarked Muguet and Péliesson, who had once been ship's writer on a galley in the harbor of Toulon. He was a little old man, carefully shaven. Recurrent pains forced him to drag his leg with the curious limp of men who have worn "socks," which are the separate chains used for prisoners in the galleys.

"When I was writer on the galleys," he would say, "I bunked with the overseer in the after-cabin. I was paid twelve crowns a month. Along with my other duties, I bought the provisions and kept accounts, and in that way earned twelve crowns more. I always believed that the day would come when I could keep a tavern of my own. I stayed in the galleys all my life in hopes of buying a tavern. Here I am."

"And you never bought your tavern?" asked the soldiers.

"There was a girl at Malta, when I gave up my post. She was blonde and a Jewess; her father had been burned by the Holy Inquisition. As for me, you know . . ."

Nobody listened. The soldiers and sailors were speaking of other things. The old ship's writer jerked

his head, opened the door, felt the mist with his hand and disappeared.

Sometimes I would warm myself in the taproom and watch these gentlemen with marvelously open eyes. One of the wenches, Marion la Penerez, would speak to me now and then, laughing. When I was carrying glasses she would pinch my legs. One day she made me drink from her own glass. The ship's writer was sitting beside her, and I heard him whisper, "Give him a rendezvous!" She smiled without answering. "A rendezvous," repeated Péliisson. Marion raised her shoulders. But the writer said to me, "Your master is away, sit down and drink our wine." Marion moved closer to me on the bench. When I felt her leg brushing against mine, I drew back instinctively. "He is frightened," the girl said. And turning to her companion, "What does he know! He has never seen a woman."

"You lie," I said to Marion, and my voice trembled with rage. "You lie, I know what a woman is. I have looked under a woman's skirts."

"*Maké guir* (it is not true)," said Marion in Breton, with contempt.

She reeled to her feet and held her glass toward me . . .

"Here, drink, my little lad, it's wine."

Muguet had just come in. He took the place beside Marion's, and his sword clattered on the bench.

"I know what a woman is, do you hear me, Marion?" And I repeated the history of the wood and of the peasant girl I loved and killed through curiosity.

"What sort of a lad is this . . . this . . ." Marion repeated as if struck by thunder.

The ship's writer touched my cheek with a patronizing gesture. He looked at Muguet. I wanted him to speak and added hostilely:

"I did nothing wrong."

"Hold your tongue," said the woman. Then she added, "There is nowhere else in the world you could hear so disgusting a tale."

When the master returned he sent me to wash my bottles in the courtyard.

My great anger had not subsided. I talked to myself. An immense force swelled my breast.

Ah, no, I regretted nothing, no indeed! But the lack of success my story had encountered with this prostitute and these coarse men made me vaguely uneasy.

Muguet found me in the court, where he had come to make water against the wall, as was his custom. Turning his back to me he asked, "What will you do? You can't stay here . . . answer me in the Devil's name."

"Why?"

"You can't stay here. You must go to sea with me and the ship's writer. Tomorrow I shall show you to MacGraw, by God's beard. It is for your own good."

"Yes, Muguet," I said full of enthusiasm, "yes, I will sail the open main with you, like the others. And later I can buy a tavern with the King's money."

"Oh, the King . . ." Muguet grunted as he fixed his buttons.





### III



### III

SNOW was falling over the deserted moor. In the distance we could hear the waves breaking on the reefs of the shore. A thousand cannon were thundering on the high seas, and the shrill cry of the gulls gave promise of a nourishing wreck.

Muguet went first and I followed with Péliisson, lighting our path with a lantern.

The iron frame of the lantern designed a gigantic St. Andrew's cross on the snow, and our shadows lengthened to comic or funereal shapes, touching the snow and the white-powdered gorse and taking outlines which varied with the accidents of the surface.

The snow whipped our spray-reddened faces and our eyes ran with tears.

"Name of God!" Muguet swore, crossing himself with his free hand.

The whole moor whirled in the snow. All paths were wiped away. We marched by the troubled lantern-light toward a fixed point on the shore, which we must

reach before the break of day. We marched toward another little light, rocked by the force of the waves: the light of the *Morning Star*, hanging in her crow's nest where a blue-fingered sailor was shivering.

"You shall see MacGraw," hiccoughed Péliisson, "you shall make your oath on the Bible, you shall meet George Merry and all those of the Antilles. And perhaps you may see Monseigneur, a true gentleman, a former standard-bearer of the Admiral."

"He always wore his blue uniform, with red breeches and red stockings," replied Muguet, who was bent double so as to offer only the top of his cocked hat to the squall.

"You shall see," continued Péliisson . . . By God's beard! I can see nothing at all . . . and the ship's lantern, God's beard, is dead."

We halted, all three, motionless under the snow, pressing one against the other. The wick shrivelled in the lantern.

The sea had grown calm. There was a noise far off like the delicate harmony of oboes and flutes. Péliisson trembled in all his members and I could hear the teeth of Muguet chattering.

It was indeed like the melody of oboes, mingled with pulleys creaking somewhere toward the sea. In the black sky a single star grew visible.

"The Southern Cross!" my two companions muttered to themselves.

And Péliisson, kneeling in the snow, began to recite a prayer.

Muguet, as he kneeled, forced me to imitate him.



"*Laudate sia lo nome de lo bon Giesu,*" wept Pélisson.

"Amen," replied Muguet.

Pélisson's voice became that of a little girl.

"*And you others, seigneurs marinari fariens pri-guière to God and to Madone Santa Helena may God grant you la bonne sere mesi lou Patron, mesi lou nochier, et tutti quanti la voustre valenti compagnie da poupe à proe.*"

"*Ave Maria per nave,*" wept Muguet.

And the wind dispersed the oboes of misfortune. We listened.

"You hear nothing more," said Pélisson.

I strained my ears.

"All over," replied Muguet as he rose.

"Let us march on," said Pélisson; "misfortune is driving out to sea. This orison is the best of all. When you have been cruising on the galleys of Toulon, you know this prayer is never trusted vainly."

"You must write it on a piece of paper for the lad," said Muguet.

We were coming near the shore. The orison had calmed the storm and the snow. At a distance, in the crow's nest of the *Morning Star*, a yellow light shone feebly.

Pélisson whistled through his fingers as he approached the sea.

"Look out for the holes," warned Muguet.

Another whistle replied from the ship, which loomed black against the pale sky, with cordage as fine as hair.

A lantern crossed the deck, and I heard orders in a language which I did not understand.

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"It is George Merry," Muguet told me.

George Merry held a lantern in his outstretched arm as he stood in the bow of a little rowboat which swam to the beach. He was lighting the route my two comrades had chosen for me, toward the little tavern on which all the resources of my tranquil imagination were concentrated, toward the happiness seen vaguely in my dreams.



IV.





#### IV

THE quartermaster's name was Pitti. He was once a sailor of Toulon, but his too-great skill at knife play had brought him to the galleys. Then for a long time he scratched the Mediterranean with his oar, sometimes, on holidays, to the sound of horns, from which his more fortunate comrades drew sounds that were not unpleasant to hear over the waters at the fall of night.

Thanks to the aid of a companion who had been appointed to a small post at a monthly salary of one pistole, he succeeded in escaping, in reaching Africa, and finally, after many hazards, the *Morning Star*, where George Merry learned to value his robust qualities.

There was also an old soldier of the French Guard who had known Raveneau de Lussan, and there was the man from Nantes. These three, and myself, were the only Frenchmen on board. The former Guardsman was called Marceau. We were the four *fanandels*, as



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he said; four comrades of the same nation, without common memories.

At that time I could not express myself in English, and for this reason sought the friendship of Marceau, the man from Nantes and Pitti. Afterwards I became the friend of MacGraw. I formed the habit of thinking like MacGraw, for he was a man born for my admiration, and I copied his habitual gestures. In later years his manner of reacting to people and things was often expressed through my lips.

It was Pitti who taught me the trade and who showed me the complicated play of ropes and spars along the mast. I would help him store the booty in the hold and, every evening, would light the lamp above the compass-box. Sometimes I climbed to the crow's nest in the mainmast and, beside the man from Nantes, would watch the horizon, spying out the swollen sails and first troubling promises of the capture.

In the service of George Merry, my youth was that of a sly and submissive Ganymede.

And these strange services belonged to my role of cabin boy. Nobody thought of reproaching me. I was never effeminate. My youth was robust and brutal, and I learned to know good and evil only from the teaching of my instincts. Evil was pain, and good was pleasure under the most incongruous forms.

I also grew to conceive good and evil in connection with the *Morning Star* and the common lot which we must share till death, in the manner of gentlemen of fortune.

The sea developed the resources of my imagination,

which were feeble enough at the beginning. During those first days when I was forced to struggle against it, the sea impressed me strongly; and later, in spite of its continual surprise, I came to regard it as the natural frame for my actions or thoughts, in much the same fashion that I regard Nancy's chamber while I write, and my green parrot nibbling at its perch.

Formerly, when I stood on the jetty at Brest and surveyed the great, eternally moving sea, I would try with my poor similes to reconstruct the other shore. I peopled its banks with indefinite characters and puerile riches. In my opinion the sea was a boundary between the real and the kingdom of the imagination.

When, having crossed the sea, I became acquainted with the wonders of the other shore, I retained nothing but a violent taste for agreeable realities. Thus I encountered bitter and savage adventures, full of hardships, which I underwent for the love of a wench from Caracas or Vera Cruz: a ten-days' love mingled with the childish joys of alcohol.

The Sea! Poets I have read compare it to this or that, according to the quality of their education and the force of their emotions, but for me it was the broad highway of the old *Morning Star*, and sometimes a crossroad where bounding ships would spit their broadsides, and where the clink of moidors grew suddenly ridiculous, in the great silence of the limitless sky and the water without horizons.

I have seen nothing so little, so mean, so poor and so disproportionate as a fight between two vessels of the line. The frame is too gigantic for the action.

Sometimes we were terrified by the sea, when the *Morning Star*, shaken by the howling demons of the storm, would lose its dignity as a brig.

However, when the calm returned, we would empty the boarding-nets full of water and foam over the rail, and spit on the little waves chopping sullenly against the vessel's flanks.

Then I would lick my forearms where the skin was torn off by the ropes, and George Merry, with his cocked hat tilted back over his black silk nightcap, would fill his pipe and smoke like a calm shoemaker at the door of his shop.

The sea no longer existed. It enveloped us and we did not give it a glance. Our old grandmother the sea was not worth considering, till the day when the lookout signaled heavy Spanish galleons on the horizon, choked with gold and green-skinned men-at-arms.

O Mother Ocean! Some choose to regard you as a transparent and impenetrable tomb. But you, old expanse of mooring water, sea of the tropics, were only our instrument of toil, the bench of the artisan completing his masterwork, our own sea, indispensable to the career of men gathered under the black flag. O Sea, you still retain the corpses of my friends, these sailors whom death has altered into unhinged and comic puppets. By the thread of your mysterious currents you roll the procession of drowned and feeble bodies; in the moonlight you ridicule the whittled corpses of those whom you nourished, O Sea, force without passion, displaying your great decorative serpent at intervals from century to century.

O Sea, splendid in the name of the Southern Cross and the high spars and funereal fife of the *Flying Dutchman*: these disturbing elements of the legend with which sailors and gentlemen of fortune are used to people the arid deserts of your groaning immensity!







v





## V

THE tenth of October, 1720, while coasting the northern shore of Jamaica, we sighted a sloop at anchor in Dry Harbor Bay.

As was the custom among gentlemen of fortune, George Merry gave order to hoist the black flag. We risked nothing by informing the stranger of our true quality, and the mere display of our funereal bunting gave the results which we were privileged to expect. Two men who were aboard the sloop leaped into a boat moored to the stern and pulled hastily for the shore, where we soon lost sight of them.

George Merry had himself rowed to our prize. He was escorted by his boatswain (we called him Peter Black Sheep) and by a sailor from Dieppe whom we had enrolled in North Carolina while we were lurking at the mouth of the Roanoke.

At the fall of night Peter Black Sheep and the sailor rowed back to the *Morning Star*. We helped them to embark whatever merchandise they had found. It

was indeed a modest booty, but on considering the small effort it had cost, we greeted it with satisfaction. The fact must also be remembered that our last cruise had been unsuccessful, fortune having abandoned the folds of our flag.

George Merry remained on board the sloop that night and the day which followed. As for us, gathered on the deck, we busied ourselves dividing the cargo of the captured vessel: that is to say, several bolts of calico, coffee in sacks, beeswax and tobacco. It was the quartermaster who was charged with valuing and distributing the portions. Afterwards we fell to mending the tarpaulins which covered our guns.

Before our eyes the pillaged sloop rocked in the breeze. No sound troubled the quiet of the harbor. We stretched out on the deck, heads buried in our crossed arms, lying on our backs with our shirts open, and we rested. Many slept like beasts, with little, nervous starts. And we were so exhausted that our dignity as men had ceased to exist.

In the evening we heard the whistle of George Merry. A lantern was lighted in the sloop. Peter Black Sheep and the Dieppe sailor manned the boat to bring back our captain. When they returned to the *Morning Star*, all of us were sleeping. Thomas Skins, who was keeping watch at the tiller, told us later that they were four.

\*           \*           \*

Early in the morning George Merry gave order to hoist the anchor. The fair south wind allowed us to

carry every sail, and the *Morning Star* whipped northward toward the hazards of our profession.

The air was of an enchanting purity. It seemed, to each of us, that the breeze was bearing the springtime perfumes of his own country, and those of our band who had known the forgotten sweetness of a village in Normandy felt their eyes aching with tears which they did not shed. Our imagination was of no rare quality, but there are days when the sea can soften the stoutest heart into the sentiment of something voluptuous and vague.

The man from Nantes took his fife and translated, into frail melodies, the ecstasy in which our hearts were melting. When Captain Merry approached our circle, we saw for the first time that he was followed by a tall young man with robust limbs, whose beardless face expressed audacity and the pride of adventure. George Merry introduced this new gentleman of fortune, who desired to submit himself to our laws and to the sterile fantasy of our wandering life.

The sudden appearance of this elegant comrade silenced the magic flute. None of us uttered the impression which this proper sailor, with his decided air, had created in the hell of our hearts.

It was evident that the captain had proffered his friendship to the new comrade, whose hair, tied back with a ribbon, was as delicate and tender as that of a very young child.

The stranger (because of his irritating grace he would always remain a stranger to our band) showed himself an able sailor. He was supple and seductive as



he climbed the ropes, and his knife, which he held clenched between his small teeth, made him resemble a young cat carrying a fish. He knew his trade and therefore we respected him a little. Besides, his beauty impressed us enough to win him the right to remain obedient, taciturn and distant.

Thereupon we gave chase to two Dutch merchantmen bound for Martinique, one of them in ballast and the other with a cargo of sugar and cocoa. The fight was savage, but the booty exceeded our hopes. All night we burned rum in great kettles of red copper. Pew and the man from Nantes drew knives and fought. Dawn found us sprawled on a quarterdeck which was still covered with powder, spotted with blood and pitch.

Our handsome comrade had shown himself a true gentleman of fortune. And when at daybreak the orgy was repeated, he drank with us from a silver loving cup, wiping the brim before he touched it to his lips. He was making a gesture to raise it to our success when a little hook at the collar of his embroidered shirt gave way, and in a stupor we beheld the revelation of breasts in a double cupola as pure, as amiably rounded, as the pink domes of the cathedral of St. John the Hermit, at Palermo.

Surprise left us mute before this woman whom chance had revealed to us brutally.

Then, we stretched our fists toward her, we howled oaths which we had learned in every language of the globe, we spat on her feet like the damned, and our anger rose, rose in measure to the obscene words welling from our throats.

For we reproached her with standing motionless before our eyes in her calm beauty, and above all because she had watched us, the future clients of Execution Dock, in the horror of our coarseness, our unshaven faces, our dirty linen, our smells, our misery.

And we reproached her, without being able to specify the motives of this rage, for having surprised us as we searched with dirty fingernails for the humiliating lice which gnawed us.

And we reproached her because she had not revealed herself in time; that we might attempt her conquest by embellishing our faces and our hands, according to the methods familiar to all men, before we cut our throats for bitter joys.











## VI

THE ship, after we looted it, sank gradually during the first hours of the night. For a long time we could see the light of a lantern abandoned in the crow's nest; it shone like a glow worm. Then the lantern was extinguished in its turn.

Being assembled on the deck, we ate rapidly to restore our strength; punch served by the cook and the quartermaster flowed like green flames into bowls of earthenware.

George Merry, his two lips advanced in a pucker along the thin stem of his church-warden pipe, probed the gashes in the side of his ship like a surgeon probing wounds. "Hm . . . hm . . . ." he snorted with an indignation no better than pretense, since the deck of the *Morning Star* was cluttered with valuable merchandise and with captives whom we had saved from the ship for reasons easy to understand.

These captives were seven. The gentlemen of for-

tune strolled round the weeping group which they formed at the foot of the mainmast. They must have been beautiful all seven, but the memory of what they had seen on the sea at the break of night deformed their faces under a mask of terror.

"We shall divide the spoils tomorrow," said Merry.

"Why not tonight?" asked the man from Dieppe.

"You . . ." Merry said, advancing toward him.

The man from Dieppe recoiled, stumbled among the coiled ropes and fell backwards on a chest. The sailors chuckled. Their mouths were full. A few washed their faces in copper basins. They scratched the blood which had dried in black scabs along their arms, and the cold water hardly turned it pink.

However, as nobody could sleep because of the presence of women, George Merry called the crew together on the foredeck. They brought the most beautiful of the captives, a girl with dark hair and an astonishing white skin. She walked like a queen, with an ease which disconcerted us. Her robe of gray velour had a blood spot on the sleeve. Without saying a word, Pew dipped a cloth in water and tried to remove the spot. The woman thanked him by bending her head, and then turned to face us, with her hands behind her back. She stared at us securely, without bitterness. Her splendid eyes went from one to another. She rubbed her hands, snapped her fingers covered with rings, and sought the eyes of George Merry, whose face had flushed crimson.

"Signor," she said.

Her voice was warm and grave, and Pitti, who spoke

Italian, approached her and asked I do not know what question in her own tongue.

"The Signora," he said, turning toward us, "is Italian. She says that she can sing." He added, "We might find out."

"We can find out," Merry replied, and every one sat down where he was, without making a sound.

Old Nantes took his fife and played a prelude, but the Signora imposed silence with a gesture of her hand. Upright in our midst, with her fine velvet gown blood-spotted, she sang, and her voice mounted over the sails like a great white bird, peaceful, extraordinarily peaceful.

She sang in a splendid and sonorous language which we did not know. Without understanding the sense of her words we all, open-mouthed, let ourselves be charmed, like the mariners of Ulysses who sailed, one time, over ancient seas.

Her pure voice did not evoke the violent death which was our fate, but rather something gentle, belonging to none of our memories. We buried our heads between our hands, and were penetrated by this divine voice which we endowed with only the vaguest meaning.

Celestial violins accompanied our passenger, and we were ravished to think of nothing but her enchanting song.

And the voice climbed into the light like a flame and was extinguished as suddenly.

We were still silent in the darkness. George Merry's pipe pierced the shadow with a red and palpitating glow.

The Signora, with her hands still joined behind her back, smiled at amiable visions which it was not our fortune to inspire. And Merry knocked the ashes from his pipe and old Nantes hid away his flute. Two of us carried the chest of the Signora into George Merry's cabin. He spent all the night with us, while in his cabin aft the splendid singer slept peacefully.

\*      \*      \*

The next day George Merry proceeded with the division of the spoils according to custom. The six women were to be held in common as far as the Isle of Barnacko, where we counted on selling them to the colonists. Exception was made, without a word, for the Signora.

However, while she watched the sea indifferently, George Merry pointed her out with the end of his pipe and asked:

“And that one?”

“She must go free,” said MacGraw.

“Could we do otherwise?” approved Pitti.

“To a vote, to a vote,” George Merry shouted angrily.

It was decreed at the end of this abnormal consultation that the passenger should be mistress of her person and her baggage as long as she remained on the *Morning Star*.

George Merry stamped down to his cabin. He understood for the first time that, with the presence of the siren, insubordination would steal upon his ferocious servitors.

The Signora slept on the poop, in a demure boudoir

which we had contrived beside the powder magazine. She remained two days, walking about our ship like a queen, and every evening she sang at the foot of the mainmast.

On the morning of the third day, the watch announced land to larboard. George Merry gave orders to follow the shore. Thus we circumnavigated the little island, which we believed deserted. Our belief was confirmed in the evening, when the ship's boat returned with the men whom we had charged with exploration. Indeed the island was deserted: a bare rock covered with low moss, where three great motionless sea-birds watched.

And now George Merry had the signora brought to his side, and passed an iron chain around her neck, supporting a little pine board on which, during the night, he had engraved at the point of a red iron:

LORD OF HOSTS!

REPEL THE FOOT OF MAN

FROM THIS ACCURSED SPOT

The woman became frightfully pale. She burst into sobs. Then she promised, doubtless, things which we did not understand.

MacGraw, accompanied by the quartermaster and the carpenter, took the ship's boat and conducted the passenger to the island, whence the three birds took wing.



Afterwards the men returned. A long time, for we were forced to tack, we could perceive the woman with her own headboard riveted to her neck. She menaced us and held out her fists. Then she rolled on the ground, twisting her arms.

\*           \*           \*

Five years later, almost day for day, we again passed by the island where our passenger had been marooned. George Merry asked to take the tiller when we made our landing. He leaped to the shore like a madman and marched straight ahead, sometimes to the north, sometimes to the south. At the end of an hour we were satisfied that the island was indeed deserted, and that there remained no trace of the passenger.

"She is dead," said MacGraw. "She is dead. She threw herself into the sea."

"And her chest?" Merry asked in a weak voice.

MacGraw looked around him and shrugged his shoulders.

"Lord of Hosts," Merry said, "perhaps she is not so dead as we think! . . . And who will tell me," he howled with despair, "that I shall not see her again some day, some night or day, on a vessel like the one which bore her when she was captured?"







## VII

It was our custom during the summer to cruise in the latitude of Newfoundland, finding it profitable to give chase to the fishing barks which frequent the numerous bays and harbors of that island.

For the most part our booty consisted of different provisions: salt fish, rum, brandies and tobacco. Poverty and even starvation would often force the poor fishermen to enlist under the folds of the black flag.

We were seventy gentlemen of fortune on board the *Morning Star*, and George Merry was still our master, for hell had taken him under its protection. Our last prizes had been satisfactory, and even the most greedy found no cause for complaint. Each man was able, according to his mood, to caress necklaces of gold, or pearls as fluid as sand when it is pressed between the fingers. We had golden chains which we raised in our hands like a woman's hair, while the sun made them flame with a thousand fires. On the deck at night, in the shadow of the guns, livid hands could be seen to

fondle stones as luminous and of the same essence as the star which glittered at the zenith.

For those who, being less greedy for material treasures, found their joys in alcohols no less precious than gold, the fife of the man from Nantes wove rhythms without origin or tradition. And each of us translated them according to his fancy: dancing with calves which swelled under red silk stockings like those of His Majesty's Marines, with a cutlass bumping against his legs, with his face in a grimace to amuse the spectators, and with an equilibrium which too often was unsteady.

Thus we danced like madmen on the deck by the light of the stars, and our shadows, prolonged beyond reason, made our furious gavottes still more indecent.

During the day we warmed ourselves beastlike in the sun. Stretched out on our bellies, leaning on our elbows, we played at cards or dice, and we kept a pile of moidors within the reach of our hands. The extreme variety of the coins was always the cause of violent discussions. At such moments Thomas Skins would draw a notebook from his pocket—the famous notebook where he recorded the total of his shares—and would settle the difference of values with the scrupulous methods of a Dutch money changer. Our cards were English, engraved from copper with the different costumes of the London merchants.

\*      \*      \*

It was the last Sunday of our cruise off Newfoundland. The day being sacred to the Lord, several of our number refused to play cards, in manner of derision.



To pass the time we made a circle on the foredeck, and we examined the most precious or entertaining articles which chance, in the guise of a young sailor, had let fall to our lot.

Thomas Skins showed us an ivory pipe. It had a hinged silver lid which was delicately carved in the Florentine style.

Peter Black Sheep exhibited a Bible printed at Cologne, which we could turn by inserting a key between its pages and reciting the Gospel of St. John: *In principio erat verbum*. . . .

The captain showed us a snuffbox, with a secret bottom which revealed a finely painted image. Each of us examined it in turn, nudging his neighbour, winking, and making a joke.

MacGraw, the surgeon—without comparison the most educated of our band—showed us the miniature of a young girl holding a little dog in her arms. The eyes of the dog were luminous and troubled bowls, like those of ewes in the dark.

We all examined this infinitely gracious miniature, and although the other image, that of the snuffbox, was still engraved on our eyes, we could find no word to soil the innocence of this pretty schoolgirl.

MacGraw bent over the miniature. "You know . . . each one of us has met a young girl like this. Neither more beautiful nor less beautiful nor less pure. Such was the nature of the young girl we knew in other days. And for many of our company, the memory goes deep."

"Give me your picture," said the man from Nantes.

When MacGraw passed him the miniature, he sighed:

"All the same, by the blood of God, it's true. And if I told you that I could give a name to the face of this angel; if I said that in the town of Nantes, when I was fifteen, I could have called her, just as you would call a girl Jeanne-Marie . . . Jeanne-Marie was indeed her name."

Old Nantes gave the miniature to Thomas Skins, and Thomas Skins smiled with a smile which changed him beyond recognition.

"Rose or Mary: I could call the picture by these two names. There is too much sugar in my memories."

He wiped his eyes and passed the miniature to his neighbour. And the man tossed his head, saying:

"A girl like that could only be named Katje."

We stared each other in the face. We were hard to recognize, for the lines which the salt of all the seas had bitten into our cheeks were melting in an unexpected gentleness.

"Yes," the man from Nantes declared, "this picture recalls memories which I do not like to mention. At this very moment I can imagine myself in a narrow street of the town where I was born. I can hear the voices of my mother and Jeanne-Marie. I must have been a boy like the others, but may the devil carry me off if I can imagine the sort of boy I was. I recall Jeanne-Marie very clearly. In my memory she is surrounded with the flowers she used to decorate her window. I have seen women and flowers since that day, more beautiful than those of my native city. Can any

one tell me their names? May I be hanged at Charleston if I can remember a name, a single name."

"Old Nantes is like the rest of us," said Thomas Skins. "We have all seen more than mortals are allowed to see and we remember nothing, except perhaps a girl's nickname we heard when we were young."

The night of high latitudes was creeping over the bay. The rigging of the *Morning Star* was a black outline against the purple of the twilight. We were bathed in a great peace, and we let ourselves drift on the warm river of our memories. The man from Nantes spit, and we could see that he wanted to sob. However, having coughed to strengthen his voice, MacGraw demanded:

"Then, if somebody should say, 'You will all return to the beginning of your lives, and there you will choose, knowing what you know. . . .' What would you do?"

We jumped up with a start, and the man from Nantes, speaking for all of us, raised his arm toward the sky:

"We would choose, in God's name, to be gentlemen of fortune."

"You are right," said MacGraw.

And he tossed the miniature into the translucent waters of the bay.













## VIII

WHEN we arrived before Veru Cruz with the Dutch flag at our masthead, hoping to trade with the Spaniard without fear of being denounced, we saw that every ship in the harbor was flying a yellow flag to indicate that a sly Death blew over the city like a great and fetid and mysterious breath.

George Merry, Anselmo Pitti and Peter Black Sheep thought we should turn and fly before the wind to escape the voracious plague, but it happened that several others, among them MacGraw, preferred to make a landing, arguing that bargains would be easy to drive in the midst of the general desolation; and they undertook, knowing an apothecary who would pay gold and ask no questions, to avoid the quarantine and the thin and haughty alguazils.

MacGraw demanded a week for our business and his own. George Merry hesitated, let himself be convinced, and the *Morning Star* sought anchorage on the coast not far from the yellow bunting of the harbor, towards San Juan d'Ulhua.

At the fall of night we untied the ship's boat and embarked: MacGraw, Pew and myself.

MacGraw was familiar with even the narrowest alleys of this Catholic city. The darkness favored our entry, and we landed noiselessly at the very foot of a great melancholy building which must have served as lazaret. We experienced great difficulty in beaching the boat and hiding it under a pile of rubbish. After this operation was completed, we washed our hands in the salt water and felt our way through the streets of the opulent city. The twilight of dawn surprised us wandering, having had the good fortune to avoid the watch and the spies of the Holy Inquisition, who flock in this city like crows in a freshly sown field.

With the light of day we found our road, and in a short time MacGraw lifted the brass knocker of a house built in the Spanish fashion, carefully closed, cool and porous as an earthenware jug which holds fresh water.

A little slot in the door opened to our summons, and a voice, hardly amiable, greeted us in these terms: "What do you want? Is this an inn to house all the dogs of creation that come here to beg shelter?"

"Perfect," said MacGraw. "Not another word . . . I recognize you, Goldfish. Old hangbird, you haven't changed. . . . Open the portal of your hospitable dwelling. It is MacGraw, with friends, and may God damn me black if I esteem the plague which will carry me off to the devil as highly as I cherish your Lordship."

We approved the terms of his discourse. Meanwhile the door had opened, and behind a lantern the face of

Goldfish appeared, to prove how much its owner deserved his name.

It bore the ornament of two red eyes. The nose was small and balanced itself over the gulf of a lipless mouth, while the receding chin was confused with the line of the throat, a feature which gave him—when combined with his bald, pointed skull—the appearance of a carp's head. His color was a fine red bronze, so far as we could judge by lantern light and by the first streaks of a livid dawn.

"Come in and close the door," said Goldfish.

We followed him. He led us across a courtyard surrounded with low buildings on the four sides and a circular gallery of carved mahogany. We climbed a flight of stone steps where Goldfish blew out his lantern, pressing his body against the wall to let us pass. MacGraw leading us, we entered a vast room decorated in a manner strangely reminiscent of hell.

"This," whispered MacGraw, "resembles a chapel built for the devotions of Blackbeard himself." He found a three-legged stool and sat down. We followed his example, seeking a place to rest our feet in the midst of pots of paint and brushes left to soak in broken jars.

"So you are no longer an apothecary?" asked MacGraw.

"No," Goldfish answered gruffly, "I have become a painter. Why did you come, the three of you?"

He drew so near that he was breathing in my face; his dry hand seized my wrist and his finger pressed the artery.



"Take care," he said.

Then turning to MacGraw he shouted angrily, "Are you sure you haven't got it? Stick out your tongue . . . and your eyes . . . how red your eyes are!"

"You should give us something to drink," said MacGraw.

Goldfish descended the stair, grumbling confused words. We heard him jingling a bunch of keys in the courtyard.

Then without saying a word we examined the room. The floor was strewn with clippings of canvas, paint pots and worn-out brushes; in one corner was a row of curious sugarloaves made of cardboard: certain of them, being half decorated, presented an aspect both grotesque and repulsive. Hanging on the walls were crosses covered with Latin inscriptions, and immense scapularies barred with St. Andrew's crosses or painted with winged devils brandishing pitchforks, breathing out flames.

We were examining these decorations, which were incomprehensible to say the least, and granting the poverty of the materials could only suggest a vulgar masquerade, when Goldfish returned with two bottles and placed them on a table beside a stub of candle, some crusts of bread and oranges dried to the skin.

We filled our glasses and drank to his health. And before we set them down we heard a deep murmur in the street, a sort of groan, with the trampling of horses and the majestic hum of a crowd at prayer. We rushed toward the shuttered windows to see a religious masquerade whose aspect astounded us. Between two files



of soldiers in ragged uniforms, carrying their muskets without discipline, marched a group of men and women dressed in scapularies painted like those we had seen on the walls of the room. They wore a sort of grotesque bonnet, which explained the use of the sugarloaves we had found so repulsive. Mulatto slaves were marching behind these carnivalesque penitents. On the shoulders of the slaves were wooden boxes in the form of little coffins. Priests were chanting in the midst of the confusion, and the girls of the scapularies and painted bonnets, white with terror, questioned the crowd of bearded men with the glances of their enormous eyes. Their jaws trembled. Sometimes they sank to their knees, and at these moments a confessor, without dropping his crucifix, would help them to their feet with unwelcome benevolence.

"The Inquisition," said MacGraw, "and a few Jews they are leading to the stake. The Dutch flag protects us."

"They brought the plague here," Goldfish replied. "I have painted the angel of the plague on their bonnets—which are called carrochas—and on their samar-ras, for I am the official painter of the Holy Inquisition. These witches were an opportunity to display the sensitive coloring of my best work."

He added in a level voice as the procession wavered and resumed its march, "I paint the crosses, the samar-ras with a gray background, and the carrochas. See how the portrait of the heretic or sorcerer is treated with ease and vivacity! I paint from nature, in the very gaol where these wretches weary the heavens with

their cries. Let me recommend this young maid or matron, it doesn't matter, the third after the file of men. Do you see her? I painted her portrait on the two faces of the samarra. The wench is wearing this artistic garment for having denied her guilt before the Holy Tribunal, in spite of the fact that she was convicted of cursing our city with the odious and melancholy plague, whose victims lose, it is said, the sentiment of God.

"At night," confided the mortuary painter, "it seems that all my taut skin converges toward an enormous bubo which bursts with the noise of thunder. The Yellow Death will dominate the world, and volcanoes are only its buboes, perhaps the messengers of a fleshless liberty if I can credit my dreams."

"What about business?" asked MacGraw.

"May the devil here painted carry you off!" howled Goldfish. "This gallows carrion comes here to talk of business when the whole city is trembling like a little girl stretching out her hand to a fortune teller.

"Examine my portraits instead (the man was growing hysterical), and in my portraits find the decorative principles of the tortures, varying in accordance with the soul of the patient, his tastes, what he has been, what he will become, and above all else the things which he regrets, for the subtlety of my art consists in materializing the regret of life by means of images, only a part of which are symbolic."

The artist took his head between his hands and wailed, "My masterpieces, my poor masterpieces. Once more they are the victims of the auto-da-fé! Ah, the

imbeciles who paint red crosses on vulgar sanbenitos are less to be pitied than I. . . . the most cunningly tortured of all the patients of the Holy Inquisition!"

"When this damned masquerade has crossed the square," murmured MacGraw, "we shall leave the painter to his art. Then, God be willing, we shall re-join George Merry, and quit this land where fever, like a pagan divinity, bathes in every spring."

"The city is like an enormous, red-hot copper coin," added Pew. He clicked his tongue, for the air about us smelt of hot copper, and at intervals when a little breeze sprang up, there was the odor of wood smoke and grilled flesh.

"You are wandering," said Goldfish interrupting the course of his dreams. "You wander and I think you are trembling. . . . Whence do you come . . . with this swollen tongue . . . these eyes rimmed with scarlet and this exaltation of the least emotions before the spectacles of nature?"

"Easy, easy, Goldfish. Remember the old days in London when you drank urine punch with the 'German widows' of Mother Knox in Covent Garden. Forget these mummeries. . . ."

"Mummeries! Gentlemen, your Lordships! He opens his mouth to blaspheme, he . . ."

Goldfish, half suffocated, raised his hands to his neck, which was swollen like a puff-adder. Then he grew calm, rubbed one hand against the other and, timidly, approached the door.

"Gentlemen," said the renegade, "I place my treasures under your protection." He pointed to the car-

rochas and sanbenitos. "I am leaving you in haste to seek the elements of a banquet worthy of your Lordships and of an old comrade, though I confess that I hardly understand his remarks on our former life. I shall return."

He made a step toward the door . . . one step only . . . but I swear that we all saw, by the expression of MacGraw, that we must act without delay. Anyhow, MacGraw was the first to leap at Goldfish, who could not withstand the shock and fell on his two knees. He grunted.

And MacGraw strangled him with his two powerful hands, while we held the prone limbs of the painter of sanbenitos. His eyes revolved slowly, his tongue stuck out of his mouth and his violet-spotted face became a mask like those he painted. MacGraw, growing tired, unlaced his fingers; a spark of life seemed to reanimate the hideous patient. Our comrade knitted his embrace three times, till we felt that the man had just died within our hands.

"He meant to denounce us for what I said about the monks," panted MacGraw.

We left the twisted body on the floor, and from behind the shutters we inspected the public square, now empty, airless, hot. A madman ran in the shelter of the walls, seeking a patch of shade. He raised his arms to the sky. Out of breath he seated himself beside a dry fountain and rolled on the ground, scratching the earth like a wounded beast.

"Perhaps it is time for us to go," I said. MacGraw and Pew nodded their heads, but this hasty departure

had too much the air of a flight, and we hunted for some sort of compensation.

We took Goldfish, and such as he was, his face in agony, we dressed him in a gray scapulary where unfinished demons howled at flames in the shape of tongues; we set a cardboard bonnet on his head, and it was the final brush stroke to complete the ghastly personage which we had just created, being artists also in our fashion. When he was dressed we carried him into the courtyard and hanged him before the door with his feet resting on the stone slabs of the vestibule.

"We can't go out," said Pew, "not by day. We must wait till nightfall. . . . We strung him up too soon. . . . Have I a fever? Feel if I have a fever, MacGraw."

MacGraw, in the shadow of the courtyard, laid a finger on the vein of Pew's wrist.

"No cause to worry," he said.

We sat on a step, all three, without saying a word, staring at the corpse in its pointed bonnet.

"It hurts me still . . . my heart . . ." said Pew again. He leaned forward a little to vomit.

"Go farther, pig," said MacGraw.

We waited for the night, like thieves broken on the wheel and waiting for death. The minutes dripped slowly past and the sun, which we saw from the court as if from the bottom of a well, refused to slant its deadly rays.

"I . . . it . . ." said Pew.

He did not dare to complain. I saw MacGraw in



the shadow, feeling his own artery at the wrist, slyly, uneasily.

And with the fall of night, while the moist odor of decay rose from the soil, we crossed the threshold of the demon-painter's house.

Pew's legs were limp and he could not walk. We held him by the wrist, feeling against our clenched hands the blood that beat through his veins.

The smell of burned flesh persisted in the city. A great flight of crows and vultures passed over our heads uttering different cries; a few sobbed like children.

Pew collapsed at last in spite of our efforts. We let him fall to the ground. He raised his eyes toward MacGraw, and they had grown marvelously intelligent.

"Here, Mac," he said, pointing to his heart, "Quick!" MacGraw bent over as if to examine his tongue, resting all his weight on the knife which he had applied discreetly to his comrade's heart.

We abandoned the defunct and rejoined George Merry and the band. We never spoke of Goldfish or the plague, fearing to be abandoned, as measure of precaution, in a ship's boat with biscuits, water, a rifle and a little powder. The death of Pew was explained naturally as the result of a quarrel adroitly described, according to our traditions.

But during fourteen days and fourteen nights MacGraw and I would feel, in secret, the big vein of our left wrist, and would question the image of our tongues in every mirror. . . . We had no desire to question our memories of Vera Cruz.









## IX

AFTER touching a match to the powder train and waiting for the last explosion, we saw a white cloud that rose to be shredded at the wind's caprice. The Spanish merchantman, rendered to our mercy, had pointed its bow to the sky and was sinking with all its crew.

We had saved its master for a hostage, and brought on board about twenty thousand reams of paper, a hundred hogsheads of bar-iron, and sails, serges, linen cloth and ribbons in large quantities.

We debarrassed ourselves of this fortune by changing it against pieces of eight. The skipper of the bark was our agent in the affair, negotiating with a Dutchman of Maracaibo who bought everything for cash. As reward for this service we made him the gift of liberty. After binding the skipper's hands on his breast, we tore off his clothes and one of us daubed him with vermillion.

We landed him in this state, having first adorned his rump with a long cockatoo-plume, which we dipped

for added politeness in a place whose name I am too polite to mention.

As soon as he touched the white-hot sand, the man began to run like a devil. We could see him at a distance: the town ladies dispersed in horror when he passed, running in every direction like so many ants. Soon our vessel, dragging on its anchors, concealed this pleasant tableau. Our pockets were full of gold and each of us expressed joy in his own fashion.

MacGraw had donned a black neck-cloth and was holding a silver-headed cane. With his pipe stuck into the corner of his cocked hat and the barrel of a syringe protruding from his pocket, he was making ready to embark in the jolly-boat, which galloped beside the *Morning Star* like a kid at its mother's flanks.

He invited me to take the place at his side. George Merry was at the tiller, old Nantes and Marceau at the oars.

The *Morning Star* was flying the royal British ensign at its mizzen masthead. Before us stretched the Isle of Palms, with its planters and astonishing population of wenches, whose bright costumes and broad straw hats were already to be seen. The *Morning Star's* arrival in the Bay of Venezuela had gathered all the trulls of Maracaibo.

There was gold in our pockets and we had old Nantes with his flute: all the materials were at hand for a holiday in the fields, a *fête champêtre* which would persist in our memories long after we resumed our wanderings.

When we reached the shore we were greeted as conquerors. The wenches puckered their lips and kissed us on the mouth.

MacGraw was known. Each time we landed he donated his services to all the wenches of the coast, and his reputation as a physician had won him respect and mistresses. An old woman begged him to visit her ailing daughter. We followed this Aesculapius of fortune and entered a sordid hut, where we saw a handsome mulatto girl of fifteen with her neck wrapped in cloths and her eyes full of pain.

"Daughter," said MacGraw.

He made her put out her tongue, and having produced his famous syringe, carried it to his shoulder like a musket.

"Oh! *madre*," he said, "let us have some boiling water to steep these plants which I chose especially for your daughter."

We others, greatly at our ease, teased the old woman, who answered with mumbled maledictions. When everything was ready, MacGraw took the syringe and carried it to the skirts of the mulatto. It was quite a ceremony. While old Nantes supported the patient, MacGraw inserted a pint of warm water with the delicacy of a Manon.

This exquisite spectacle had attracted the prettiest of the wenches. Each of them expressed her opinion with vehemence, while the mulatto girl sat up, pulled down her skirts, caressed her belly and moaned.

We left this bed of pain, and the fresh greensward



inviting us, took off our coats and stretched out in the shadow of the trees.

In our party were Carmen, Theresa of Lookout Island and Concepcion de Borica. White-toothed, laughing and coarse, the girls dominated us immediately.

MacGraw alone, because of the clyster, inspired respect. As for me, sitting beside a little Juanita, I could only smile at her prompt gestures. She slapped me, tickled me and pinched my face, quicker than a squirrel. I must confess that MacGraw, George Merry, old Nantes and I were counting on Marceau and his great familiarity with women's ways to liven the party. On board, the gallantries of Marceau had become legendary. When he served in the French Guards, the mending-women adored him and he had even been the ruffian of a mother-abbess, in the company, he said, of a little abbé who was called the Brewer's Pint. Marceau was fond of speaking about his past.

The wenches were laughing boisterously. They organized the party without consulting us, and bandied unintelligible phrases which set them into storms of laughter. George Merry, without speaking, tried to explore the skirts of Carmen, who tapped him on the hands with a fan of parrot feathers.

We drank. Our cups rolled on the grass while Marceau tried once more to dominate the girls. He did not succeed. He was not the hero we had imagined on board the *Morning Star*, and yet all our hopes were centered on him. Show them, we thought, just show these whores the stuff we are made of . . .



But Marceau was the victim of a brunette with a well-turned calf. We saw her winking to her comrades after he allowed her to look into his purse. We ended by giving ourselves the illusion of prestige. Old Nantes played his flute and we sang, but our chanteys had little success with these town ladies. All night we drank with them and then, a little embarrassed, we possessed them without pleasure.

When we returned to the *Morning Star* with bitter mouths and empty purses, the morning twilight was stealing over the bay. And the following evening we heard the laughs of the sirens in the Isle of Palms, and we saw our comrades returning who, in their turn, had visited the land.

However, there were names which we remembered: Juanita and Concepcion de Borica. Our confidence in Marceau the seductor returned, little by little. And we all hoped for a prompt departure and the open sea, for we were eager to arrange and decorate our memories in solitude, that we might know the bitterness of well-beloved regrets.









## X

"It's all over," said MacGraw, "Delilah's puppies are born. I can hear them whimpering near the forward companionway. She is lying behind the cask of rum. Follow me and don't make any noise."

His face was shining with jubilation. Ever since the day when I made my oath on the Bible and became his comrade, I had tried without success to discover his true face. And that afternoon, for a few hours, he showed his true face, which was that of any man, honest and confiding. This I say because our natures can be read on certain days when they appear furtively, after the taking of a prize or perhaps during the last moments which precede death. The true face of MacGraw, surgeon on board a vessel which flew the black flag, was that of a simple and good-natured man.

"Yes," MacGraw told us, "the father must be that brown cur we fed two months ago, when the *Morning Star* was beached on the sand before Corso Castle. I will save one puppy for the mother's milk."

"You must drown the others," said George Merry. "On board the *Morning Star* you are the only man allowed to own a dog, because you possessed it already when you joined our company."

"One dog is enough," said Jean from Dieppe.

"You must drown the others," George Merry said once more.

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Delilah, lying on her side, was whimpering. She was a little white bitch with a black spot on her hind quarter, straight ears, and eyes which suddenly became mad with affection when her master raised his voice.

MacGraw loved the little beast, as I loved gambling, the man from Nantes loved women, and George Merry . . . nothing.

He knelt in front of the box where the mother was giving suck to her blind puppies. Motionless, drawing in his breath, MacGraw weighed the little beasts in his hand, one by one, examining their muzzles and feet, which were the pure and violent pink of geranium petals.

"I will keep this one," he said. "It resembles the mother. It has three black spots on the back and straight ears."

"Keep that one," I answered indifferently.

Thereupon MacGraw swallowed his saliva with a gulp, and taking a puppy by one paw, he tossed it into the sea. The little stiff body made a black spot against the sky. Without stopping MacGraw drowned the four puppies chosen for this destiny.

The other was crawling in the rags to find its



mother's teats. It was grunting already like I do not know what living thing.

\* \* \*

That evening we went ashore to drink with the wenches of the *Captain Bob*. The master of the tavern, a man named Tillet, was a former shipmate of Edward Lowe. He served as our fence, and he knew the value of every currency. Under his roof we could be sure of hearing all the decisions of the Governor of South Carolina concerning gentlemen of fortune. We could drink calmly, without apprehension.

Now the wenches made efforts to tease MacGraw, who seemed morose. Our comrade was drinking heavily and without joy. He approached me, and suddenly began to speak of Delilah's puppies, the four little dogs which he had drowned.

"Of course, of course," I replied evasively to each of his remarks.

Then MacGraw moved along the bench to the side of the man from Nantes. Once more he began the story of the puppies. But old Nantes was listening to the charming voice of Isabel.

MacGraw took his hat and went away. The sea air rushed brutally into the overheated tap room.

\* \* \*

We spent a week in the town, and all that time MacGraw paraded the melancholy which he owed to Delilah's puppies. On the eighth day he met a Dutch sailor of Lowther's band.

MacGraw was the one who picked the quarrel. Beneath the flowing oleanders, Isabel watched the scene.

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She saw MacGraw plunge his knife between the two shoulders of the Dutchman, who fell on his face among the tall weeds.

And having accomplished this gesture, our friend resumed his customary good humour. He said nothing more of the puppies he had drowned. He breathed like a man who had just erased a stain from his memory. Can the blood of a man efface the blood of four little dogs? Such traits are difficult to explain.







## XI

LAUGHS and incongruous songs troubled the silence of the cabins whose inhabitants, soaked in the heat which eddies behind closed blinds, were profoundly sleeping.

MacGraw and I, fishing from the bank of the only river of the Isle of Providence, turned our heads toward the laughter. And we saw Meister, the blind man, between two girls who had given him their arms. They were Babet Grigny and Mijke from Gouda. The blind man was roaring out the chanteys which are heard on vessels consecrated to the black flag. Meister had cruised with John Rackam; his eyes had been sacrificed to the hazards of his profession. But he reigned as lord in this haven unknown to the world, among the white wenches and aborigines of the Isle of Providence. He was a fat, smooth-faced man without a chin. His eyes, dead pools in his soft and sensual face, gave him an indefinable air of tragedy which inspired both respect and contempt.



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The wenches were laughing and pushing him forward. All three of them entered a hut where rum was sold. We followed them, MacGraw and I, to pass the time and perhaps to profit by the blind man's liberality. Where the low room was cool as a porous earthenware jug, we found Meister sitting with his back against the wall. At his side Babet Grigny was running her sun-browned hands over his face with childish gestures.

She said:

"Comrades . . . *hé fanandels* . . . look at our frisky lad."

She sang, in the jargon of the taverns:

*Fanandels en cette taule*

*On vit chenuement.*

Meister would laugh, applaud, and allow the wench's fingers to pinch his expressionless, pale face. Babet Grigny, dropping her hands to her hips, let the blind man go free. She was a blonde of rather delicate beauty; her pretty face, baked by the sun, contrasted with her pale yellow hair. Mijke of Gouda, a more sullen wench, was whispering slyly into Meister's ear.

But Babet Grigny leaned back on his breast and, taking her glass, threw it full into Mijke's face.

"There, dirty trull, branded for your shame. There, carrion of the North."

The Dutch girl began to weep. "What did I do to her," she sobbed, "what did I do?"

Blind Meister composed the quarrel by standing treat. Besides MacGraw and myself, the whole crew of the *Morning Star* was grouped around him. And there was Marceau, Marceau the ladies' man,

with his uniform of the French Guard, his galloons and his velvet tricorn.

Now the blind man loved Babet Grigny with fury, with madness, like one who had lost his sight and whose wandering destiny had kept him far from the guiles of courtesans.

As introduction to the life of retirement which he was about to lead, he brought Babet Grigny into his dwelling, and she was the element of his daily torture.

Her glance dominated the man. She made him crawl, like a beast, while Meister would search for her with his cane, feeling behind chairs or under the table.

She was his concubine, adorned with the spoils of the ladies of Vera Cruz. Gold trickled down the arms and pearls clung to the neck of this petty thief who had taken flight in the darkness from the penal colony to which her crimes had led her.

And Babet Grigny loved Marceau, our former comrade of the *Morning Star*. The blind man knew even the least details of her passion. For this reason, at moments during the night, his hands would creep across the coverlet, seeking her downy neck. Babet would draw back, mocking these naïve attempts at murder. Her head was clear. She kept her faith in crime and she thought of Marceau, whose gallantries were tenaciously addressed to Mijke of Gouda. MacGraw and I, being familiar with the situation, as was every one else in the island, were in some surprise when we saw Babet leaning tenderly, like a good friend, on the shoulder of Dutch Mijke.

"Mijke, my girl," she said to her in a low voice, "you

love Marceau . . . I know you do. I can give you money enough to set up housekeeping."

Marceau had slipped his arm around Mijke's waist, and Babet Grigny did not pale. She was drinking, and raised her glass each time till she could see the bottom. The blind man held her under his arm and said nothing. But he rose suddenly. His hands were trembling, for he had felt, against his ankle, Babet's foot seeking the foot of Marceau.

We had all been watching the gallant manoeuvre. Meister paid the reckoning and went home with his wench, grown strangely docile. He was walking alone. Babet guided him no longer, and we heard his sure cane tapping the stones of the path

Now Babet Grigny and her blind lover quarreled till the middle of the night. The next day when she passed through the village she was weeping. She found us with Dutch Mijke and offered her a glass of rum.

"Mijke, I can't live with Meister any more. I am going to leave him tomorrow. But last night he promised me an incredible fortune; he says he is going to die . . ."

She spat.

"Gold? I have more gold than there are pebbles in these fields. What is the use, there is nothing here to buy . . . Ah, Paris, Paris! I have stayed too long in this den of rascals."

She grew gentle, and all day the past returned to her lips. She spoke of Paris, of the little taverns along the river, in the sun, and of a sergeant of the Guards named Balagny.

At the break of night she went home to Meister, and she left his house only to seek Dutch Mijke. All this was told us by Edward, the mulatto, whose hut was built at the side of Meister's.

Babet Grigny was speaking in a low voice:

"He's been drinking I tell you, damned little scatterbrains, I tell you he's been drinking; he will never know. When you have taken the gold you can go away with Marceau, for I never want to see you again. I never want to see you."

Mijke did not hesitate too long. Next morning we heard a peculiar solo in the house of Meister. The blind man was jumping like a carp and howling, "I killed Babet Grigny. I have killed the girl I love." But Dutch Mijke was the one who lay, with a gashed throat, on the mat of woven rushes. Babet Grigny had disappeared, and the blind man vowed himself to the Son of God, whom doubtless he was invoking for the first time. As for Marceau, he was hunting from cabin to cabin and under the live oaks peopled with fluttering doves, to find Babet Grigny and cut her throat.

Each of us made his comment on the episode, meditating on the nature of the punishments brought about by the machinery which gentlemen of fortune carry in their own breasts. Afterwards the implacable sun of the Equator triumphed over man's anxieties. The Isle of Providence returned to its diurnal torpor, while somewhere a pinnacle was slipping with the tide into the open sea. Babet Grigny held the tiller and Meister, with the hands which had cut the thread of many lives, was hoisting a sail to the head of the only mast.











## XII

WE cruised for three days in the Gulf of Honduras, meeting Charles Vane, who had just captured the *Pearl*, Captain Bowling; then we dropped anchor in one of the creeks of Barnacko, a little island where George Merry had decided to caulk the seams of the *Morning Star*.

The scanty population of this island, composed for the most part of miserable negroes, fled to the interior as soon as they saw that we intended to come ashore. The fame of our exploits had become general, with the consequence that strangers on meeting us adopted the measures which a wise prudence suggested.

Leaving only a few on the ship, we disembarked on the soil of this fertile island, dropped in the ocean like a basket too heavy with fruits and flowers. The scattered houses of the village offered little to satisfy our appetites: dried fish, fruit in earthenware bowls, milk, and shellfish which we broke with our knife handles.

While most of our band scattered through the little village to seek their fortune, the man from Nantes, Pitti, MacGraw, Jack Seven and four or five of the forecastle beaux resolved to skirt the southern shore, which disappeared at this point under the rarest samples of tropical vegetation.

I followed this little troop, for I was in the confidence of MacGraw, who liked, on certain days, to lift the veil which covered a studious past. It was through his instruction that I learned to read a Latin Bible with some correctness, and Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* in English.

"I'm thirsty," said the man from Nantes. "Have you any rum, Mac, old boy? I'll pay you back on the day we climb the gallows-rigging, to bless the girls of Savannah with our feet."

MacGraw passed him a gourd. He raised it to the tip of his arm, clenched his teeth, and poured out a thread of rum which he swallowed slowly.

We pursued our walk, with a fugitive odor of jasmine in our nostrils. Among the green tufts of banana trees and the fresh foliage of the live oaks, we saw a little cottage, blindingly white, where all the shadows were printed in blue. A bird whistling in the velvet shade of the palms made the silence more solemn, for excepting its enchanting voice, there was no sound to reveal the presence of any life whatever. We walked round the house, to prevent surprise. The man from Nantes, thrusting his head through a little window, motioned us violently to be still.

"We can go in," he said as he straightened up. We entered the shady cottage in single file.

In the middle of its one room, on a piece of worn matting unrolled from the wall, a young negress was sleeping. She was almost naked. Her hair was knotted in a yellow kerchief with violet polka dots. As for the room, its only furniture was a little chest on which, in a jug of clear water, a giant spider was agonizing. A pile of dirty linen in the corner concealed a few kitchen utensils.

"Milady!" roared MacGraw, making a trumpet of his hands.

The ebony lady started up, raising the whites of frightened eyes. During a few seconds her face expressed the most legitimate terror. Then her mouth broadened to a grin, she rose, took a few steps toward the man from Nantes and placed her two hands on his shoulders. Her lips rounded, seeking a kiss.

"I could have told you," he declared. "This lady of quality has been expecting me. I have roamed the seas for twenty years only to find this island and wed her legally. Gentlemen, I invite you all to be present at the ceremony."

With some difficulty we explained to the lady of color that old Nantes wished her for his spouse. She could speak nothing but broken Portuguese, mingled with English words. A few gestures made our meaning clear, and the negress nodded in sign of consent. Indeed, this proposition seemed to fulfill her dearest wish.

\* \* \*



The wedding was strangely impressive. George Merry had offered a cask of rum, which we carried to the bride's house on a litter of branches. We drank all day. We burlesqued the religious ceremony. The negress, in a satin bridal robe which we had found in the pillage of a French merchantman, leaned on the arm of her cavalier and bowed to powerful acclamations from the crew of the *Morning Star*.

We parted late at night, leaving the platters clean and the goblets empty. Every one returned to the ship or the huts of the village. The bridal pair were left alone with MacGraw and me, who were to pass the night in a narrow attic above their nuptial chamber.

Before wishing them a good night, we took care to empty the remaining rum into a flask which must have held six or seven quarts; and so climbed heavy-headed into our retreat, leaving the flask at the disposal of the groom, but advising him under no circumstance to let it run dry.

We fell immediately into a dead sleep, and when we woke the day was already old.

MacGraw, his hair dishevelled and his voice hoarse, called, "Ho, Nantes! Bring up the rum! We want the rum, old shipmate."

Nobody answered. We climbed down the ladder which took the place of steps, and as we entered their chamber we saw our old shipmate stretched out on the worn matting, bled white like a pig, his throat cut open from ear to ear.

"The rum is gone! She stole the rum!" howled MacGraw.

\* \* \*

We found the wife of the defunct only a few yards from the white cottage. Extremely drunk, with the flask of rum on her knees, she lay at the foot of a tree. There was blood on her hands, between her fingers.

When we raised her up to hang her she hardly opened her eyes, attempted the politeness of a smile, wished to embrace Pitti and to make some remark. Her head fell back on her breast. It took three men to pass the cord round her neck, she was so heavy and limp. In her last sleep she stuttered:

“Love! Love!”

Pitti drew the rope tight. When she felt her feet leaving the ground, she opened horrible eyes. But she died at once, almost, and she swung back and forth a long time before remaining still, extraordinarily still, in the noisy forest.











### XIII

AFTER the capture of a brigantine hailing from Yorktown, in Virginia, which we brought to mercy at the mere display of our funereal ensign, it was agreed between George Merry and his quartermaster, Pitti, that the latter should take the prize and its cargo to the Tortugas. A former soldier and buccaneer of Morgan's day was to dispose of our booty to the Spaniards of Maracaibo.

Pitti chose a dozen men from the crew, myself among them, and we embarked on this brigantine, known as the *Mary-Rose*. The strange rig and poor sailing qualities of our new vessel would make the voyage difficult; nevertheless we accepted our fortune joyously as a relief to the monotony of an unadventurous cruise along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

So we hoisted the Dutch flag as a measure of safety, deceiving a French corvette which was preparing to give chase; for we had only four guns on board the



*Mary-Rose* and Pitti showed little desire for argument, even with a lightly armed sloop.

We watched the *Morning Star* draw northward along the coast and made our way to sea with a favoring wind. A mad joy blossomed in our hearts. Thomas Skins took his fiddle, from which he drew squeaky but well-rhythmed melodies, and Jean from Dieppe, whom we called Dieppe for short, sang the old complaint of the galley slaves:

*We row all day across the sea  
Naked and sore  
All day all night across the sea  
Chained to the oar  
Upon our backs a rain of whips  
Which never ends  
And nevermore to touch the lips  
Of our friends.*

Stretched in the shade of the spanker, with the spanker-boom grazing our heads, we were listening to the singer and the fearless fiddle-scratcher when off to starboard, over the luminous and peaceful sea, we saw a little vessel black against the waves. "A rowboat!" howled Pitti. We all looked in the direction of this marvel and Thomas Skins said, dropping his bow, "It must be a runaway slave. Let him come, and we'll take him aboard to tend the galley."

Pitti continued to watch the boat and its crew of one, rowing with easy strokes toward the *Mary-Rose*.

"How d'ye do!" said Pitti. "A man in a rowboat at this distance from shore is like saying that you have

just sighted the coach-and-six of Monsieur de Cossé off to starboard, may the devil fly off with him!"

But the mysterious skipper of the rowboat dropped one oar, and raised an arm which was curiously fleshless.

We tossed him a rope. He seized it with address and clambered on board the *Mary-Rose* like a furiously decided ape. He threw one leg over the hammocks rolled in their covers along the bulwarks.

And we saw, all of us, that this agile sailor was a corpse. Sweat trickled down our temples and the blood froze in our veins. Pitti's teeth were clicking together while he sought, with insane gestures, to remember a few words from his absent Bible. "My Bible . . . in my chest . . ." He made the sign of the cross.

The dead sailor was as clean as old ivory. He wore a continual grin caused by the involuntary contraction of his muscles. To us he seemed embalmed, or rather dried like a strip of beef by the action of the sea salts; and he had both the smell of iodine and an indefinable odor of unfinished decomposition.

We heard his quavering voice. Our legs would not support us. Fear set our hearts to moving like a whirlwind. We stared down at this sailor as into abysses which a hurricane had made.

And he said: "I am Nicholas Moise of Rotterdam. My age is two hundred years and I am the youngest in the forecastle of the damned vessel which ceaselessly hurries down the highroads of the sea, like the Wandering Jew over the highroads of the land. Sailor, that

was my trade. Ah, mijnheer, I was a rich sailor, red as a carnation, and my destiny was accomplished for having perjured myself on the Bible. For two hundred years I have pulled at the halyards and worn away my hands against the twisted ropes. For two hundred years I have eaten never a radish, nor drunk sweet water from the singing brooks. And I desire the white arms of a maid round my dry neck, for the fever with which I burn is one a woman may calm with gestures which all of you have known."

He ceased, a prey to his melancholy.

And, as the blood resumed its course through our veins and the fear of this sailor vanished, who, after all, was only a dead sailor, Pitti said to him:

"Listen, Nicholas Moise, you can be at home. The *Mary-Rose* is not the *Flying Dutchman*. (He crossed himself.) You shall come ashore with us at Providence, and we shall lead you to Concepcion, Concepcion de Borica."

"And Juanita of the Isle of Palms," I added.

The dead man raised his arms toward the sky. Then he stretched out on the deck and fell asleep as in a second death.

\*      \*      \*

We landed with him, safe and sound. The Isle of Providence rustled under the live oaks. The splendid birds opened their plumes of every color against the blue sky, and the wenches cried out with joy when they saw our store of China stuffs, which the brigantine contained in ample quantity.

Nobody could recognize the quality of our com-

panion. He seemed a man of wealth, in his clean coat of an old cut, and one girl passed her white arms around his neck, but she turned her head when he tried to kiss her lips.

"Thus," said Nicholas Moïse, "my desire is satisfied; I have drunk sweet water (he glanced at the spring where the kids came down to drink) and I have felt a girl's caress." Once more he buried his mouth in the spring, then asked for rum, which was served him in a tankard. He emptied it at a draught.

Again he lapsed into melancholy, but he did not cease to repeat, "I drank spring water and made myself a necklace out of two white arms."

While we went about our businesses and pleasures all the day, Nicholas Moïse continually watched the sea. It must be said that the girls were loath to accept him in our games.

One evening he set off toward the creek where the *Mary-Rose* was riding at anchor. A long time he watched the waves chopping against its sides. Then, without noticing our presence, he leaped into the water, swam to his boat which was rocking at the stern of the brigantine, unmoored the rope, and struck off rapidly with his oars. Without a gesture of farewell he rowed toward the open sea, and soon was lost to view.

And in a moment we heard the night wind flapping the sails of an invisible vessel; and a melodious and distant oboe marked, like a thread, the course of the great *Flying Dutchman* over mysterious waters.

After which, with the terrified wenches clinging to our arms, we returned to the cabins which were shaken already by the birth-throes of the storm.











#### XIV

DURING several days this adventure rendered us uneasy. The Isle of Providence, with its wenches, infernal vegetation, and white sun which nourished incurable diseases, forced us into a dangerous path where our imaginations could be exercised freely.

Drinking and wenching could not efface our memories of the devil's boatswain, Nicholas Moise. From the smoke of our pipes rose troubled images, whose too precise details shook our shoulders with a great shiver.

And in those days a Breton who was helping us to careen our brigantine, and who, another time, had heard the disturbing harmony of the oboes of the damned vessel as they sounded over the open sea, related, to quench our thirst for mystery, the adventure which he had witnessed years before, when he was only a child with a head empty of legend.

The Breton told the history which follows, while he sat in the same tavern where Babet Grigny had carved

her name, beside Marceau's, in the table-top which reeked of sour rum.

\* \* \*

My father's calling (the Breton said) was that of shipwrecker, and he was the one who taught me the simple rudiments of his trade. We lived in a cottage shaped like a crab, half buried in the rocks by the edge of the sea, at the extreme point of the peninsula of Brittany. Let me say for the benefit of those who have no clear idea of our profession that it consisted in gathering the wrecks cast up by the sea in a little gulf where we were familiar with every current. For whole days, when clouds piled up to announce the nourishing storm, we would search the horizon through a long brass telescope. We were like two spiders in the center of a web when we watched the unfortunate vessel whose evil star was leading it toward the reef of Ker-Goez, to break apart in the howling abyss. No sort of fishing has more fascination than fishing for wrecks. Sometimes a cask of rum was rolled by the waves till it grounded on the white sand at our feet; or it might be a longboat which bore the name of an East Indiaman sailing from London, or a barrel of dry biscuits, or Spanish wines as thick and black as blood. At my father's side I would pass long melancholy hours of drunkenness before a bowl of punch. He spoke of his trade and mine with boyish enthusiasm. In the exaltation of his cups he would bless the howling demons of the storm, and when men crossed themselves, either at sea or far along the coast, he would toss his cap in the air with the delight of sacrilege.

The single room of our cottage, which no woman's hand had touched since my mother's death, grew singularly animated on nights of tempest or debauch. It was crowded with stolen objects, endowed for me with a curious life which owed much to the fact that my father grew more talkative as he drank, and would tell me the history of each piece as he touched it with the stem of his long pipe.

"Do you see that sideboard? . . . A fine sideboard, by God's beard! It was a real craftsman, God's beard! that made it. The brig it came from was wrecked off Glenans in 1689, two years ago . . . It was there we found my cocked hat with the silver galloons . . . And remember the blue broadcloth from which we made you a coat? A friar from Lorient bought the rest of the piece . . . And this carved chest, isn't it a true beauty? Remember, I found it with you, only last year, opposite the Isle of Gulls. And didn't it blow? The fishing smack which made us that little present was dancing on the water like a black cork. What weather, God's beard! Ah, my lad, our coast has no love for the ships of other ports. Bad luck to the English. Drink, little suckling, your father in hell commands you."

He laughed and gave me a dipper full of punch. My lips plunged into the hot and sugary liquor. My head was beginning to turn.

"And that?" I said, pointing to a dilapidated wicker cradle which served our bitch, Diana, for a kennel.

"The cradle? . . . It was in 1683. I found it beside the shrimp trap. Another schooner from a strange

port. That very same day I found a cask of sweet wine. . . . a good wine. Do you remember, lad? You helped drink it."

And so I would pass the evening beside my father, while winds assailed our cottage and furious seas bombarded the coast for leagues on leagues.

One night during a storm—for all the memorable nights of my youth were nights of storm—my father, being driven a little mad by rum and the barbarity of nature, rubbed his hands one against the other with an habitual gesture by which he expressed his great content.

"What a fine trade, my lad! I have no need even to stretch my nets. Providence is all-seeing and takes care of her elect . . . God's beard! This morning I saw a big three-master with all her canvas set. About this time, I think, she might be taking a reef . . ."

The wind was moaning over the open moors. I listened to my father and watched the skillet where two fat mullets were turning gold. I had taken them at the mouth of the river.

And somebody gave two firm raps on the door.

My father bounded from his seat. "The revenue men!" For a moment he hesitated.

"Open the door," he ordered in a calm voice.

He hid the bottle of rum and, with little assurance, I swung the door open. The wind rushed into the room, dragging a brutal odour of iodine, seaweed and fresh fish, the odour which the devil's boatswain, Nicholas Moise, carried about with him, and, besides, an indefinable sweetness which had the smell of death.



Thereupon a man entered, to whose sailor's jacket the curious smell was clinging. He was tall and his decomposed flesh was that of a corpse which had rolled a long time under the water, for his belly, extraordinarily swollen, gave him a grotesque and terrible silhouette.

He closed the door behind him, and showing his face where the gnawed gums gave the air of a continual smile, he moved his dead eyes from one object to another, like a man who is looking for something and does not quite recall its place.

My father was fearful to see. The sweat trickled down his forehead, and his pipe, to which he still clung, was trembling at the tips of his fingers.

"I am Hans Korck," the man said, in an astonishingly feeble voice. "I have come to find my chest. It carries my name, branded with a red iron. I am Hans, boatswain's mate on board the *Dolphin*, and I want my chest, the one you stole. At present I am sailing on the *Flying Dutchman*.

The dead man took the chest in his arms, which were gnawed by the fishes, and knocking his head against the lintel, he stumbled out. The wind carried him away.

"We must close the door," my father said in a voice which moaned.

And furiously, both of us pushing, we made a barricade of tables, chests and wardrobes against the windows and the closed door. Then my father took a dipper of rum, gave one to me, and we waited without speaking. All night the dead came to knock at win-



dows where the shutters rattled. We heard the unnatural voices of the dead claiming their possessions. One demanded his flask, another his hat, and each of them spoke his name and that of his vessel. At day-break peace returned to the sky, the water and the land. My father uttered a great sigh, rose, and took his hat.

"What a night . . . God's beard! Put on your hat, we'll take the air. There is no more danger and I am stifling."

We cleared a way to the door. Outside, we could not tell where the grey sky ended and the sea began. We thought we could distinguish at a distance the topsails of a man-of-war.

"I should have brought the long-glass," my father said, "for here is a ship . . ."

He had no time to finish the sentence: far off, behind the waves, we heard with horror the voice of a little wailing child. Thereupon my father rushed to our cottage with his hands over his ears. He returned in a moment with the wicker cradle, which he tossed into the surf.

And though we both strained our ears anxiously, we could no longer hear the voice of the little child weeping under the sea.







## XV

THE old man was trundling his barrow and bellowing to the servants:

*"Oysters O the fine oysters of Wainfleet O."*

MacGraw stopped, swung me round, and made me stare at the old costermonger. Then we looked at each other with a smile full of emotion. The city, this true European city, touched us under the shivering skin. The memory of our hardships and our joys was being effaced. For a few moments we were like London merchants, ready to obey the laws which united them under the same moral code.

Through the mediation of Charles Edin, Esquire and Governor of North Carolina, his majesty had offered a full pardon to those gentlemen of fortune who would make their submission before the last day of March. We accepted at the counsel of George Merry; at least a few of us accepted, for the others had left the *Morning Star* to serve with Blackbeard, whom we encountered the week before the publication of the decree.

"Let us make our submission," George Merry advised, "and fear nothing. The prophecy will be accomplished at the appointed hour, for no force, human or divine, can prevent us from attaining the elevated situation which is ours by right."

He snickered, and with a wide gesture:

"Go, in God's name, and take a stroll around Execution Dock. And don't forget to engage a place for that dog George Merry."

Accepting his advice, several of us engaged on board an English vessel which needed a few hands to complete the crew. We were well provided with money, and this money burned our fingers when we were lucky enough to slip it into our pockets.

"Do you know London?" MacGraw asked me. "No? Then, my lad, you shall see a fine city, finer than Vera Cruz, and in this city we shall pay a visit to our old friend Nick Spencer, the Nick Spencer of Flint's old vessel, the *Walrus*. Spencer must be the last survivor of his band."

"He must be rich!" I said.

"That is very likely, for his were the prosperous days of our profession. Besides, he was wise enough to put his money aside, instead of drinking it away like us, like you, like me. It must also be said that he married a good housewife. These facts contributed to the establishment of a tavern at the sign of *Old Moll*—old Moll Cutpurse, that is, who was buried with her face down at her own request, a long time before the Great Fire of London. Nick will be glad to see us."

\* \* \*

Our walk led us to the inn at the sign of *Old Moll*. It was a small building with a low roof, painted in ox-blood red. The sign above the door was nearly effaced by sun and fog, but reproduced, nevertheless, the features of the celebrated thief.

"Here is the inn," said MacGraw.

We lost our assurance on entering the taproom. I could never explain why our pugnacity began to disappear on the day we abandoned the *Morning Star*. And yet Spencer was an old comrade who had sailed for twenty years under the black flag and was familiar with the least of our pastimes.

We entered the parlor in single file. Copper pots were shining on the chimney-piece. Three sailors of the Royal Navy, round an oak table, were drinking ale from pewter mugs. They turned to watch us and a buxom housewife stared equally, after answering our Good morning.

"We came to see Nicholas Spencer," said MacGraw.

"He is my husband," said the woman.

MacGraw bowed. Then Nicholas Spencer appeared from the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Good day, Nick, good day," said MacGraw, with a voice full of feeling. "I am MacGraw, of the *Walrus*. This is my friend."

"Ah yes, ah yes . . . MacGraw, your friend, yes, naturally, MacGraw. Just a minute. If you take a seat, I'll drink a pint in your company."

Spencer rubbed one hand against the other, but he lowered his eyes with an embarrassed air.

\* \* \*



His wife brought us—our nerves were on edge—a pitcher of foaming beer. Having drained our mugs, we sat without speaking, our eyes fixed on the foam which still sparkled at the bottom. Spencer had the place beside MacGraw, but he looked into the distance. As the three sailors of the Royal Navy were preparing to go, he rose to take their score, and then returned to his place at our side.

“Well,” he said, “you made your submission?”

“Yes,” MacGraw answered.

“You did right.”

MacGraw shrugged his shoulders.

“And George Merry?” asked the host.

“He signed a charter with John Rackham. We shall meet him again some day, perhaps very soon . . . And you . . . don’t you regret the Antilles?”

“St. Christopher! The old Isle of Providence! And Savannah, where a wench stuck me with her knife? . . . I regret nothing.”

He rose, took the pitcher and filled it. We drank to his health, to the health of his wife. Afterwards Nick Spencer pushed back his chair and held out his right hand, which lacked two fingers, the middle and the index. MacGraw, taking his hand, sought Spencer’s eyes, but Nick turned his head.

“Listen, comrades,” said the former gentleman of fortune, almost in a whisper, “here is money; you can pay your own score; it looks more regular . . . Take the money, take it.”

MacGraw took the coins, rang them on the table

and Mistress Spencer came running with a skillet in her hand.

"Good bye, Nick," I said. MacGraw raised his hand to his hat.

We walked a long time over the pointed cobbles of the streets without saying a word. The sea wind rattled the signs of shops where articles precious to seafaring men were sold. Ambiguous women came out of the shadow, and the odor of tar could be sniffed between two gusts of wind.

Disgust was weighing on my shoulders and I said to MacGraw:

"We are alone, alone in the world, my old friend Mac."

"Spencer is also alone in the world," said MacGraw.











## XVI

ON the gibbet of Savannah, on the quai which faces Mother Ocean, a young man is hanging.

His costume is the one he wore on the *Morning Star*: a fine red coat, an embroidered waistcoat, black velvet breeches and white stockings. Everywhere an abundance of gold galloons.

On his already fleshless head his cocked hat, bleached by the sun, perches coquettishly. His hands are bound high on his back and give him the look of a hunchback.

It is George Merry, captain of the *Morning Star*. He will never smoke his long melancholy pipe, and the plump girls of Spain have nothing more beneath their skirts to excite his interest.

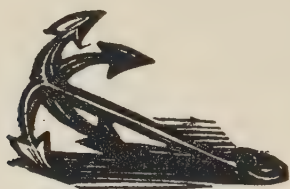
Stiff and sumptuous at the end of his rope he hardly attracts the glances of the passers-by, and the example of his death fills only the hearts of cowards with fear.

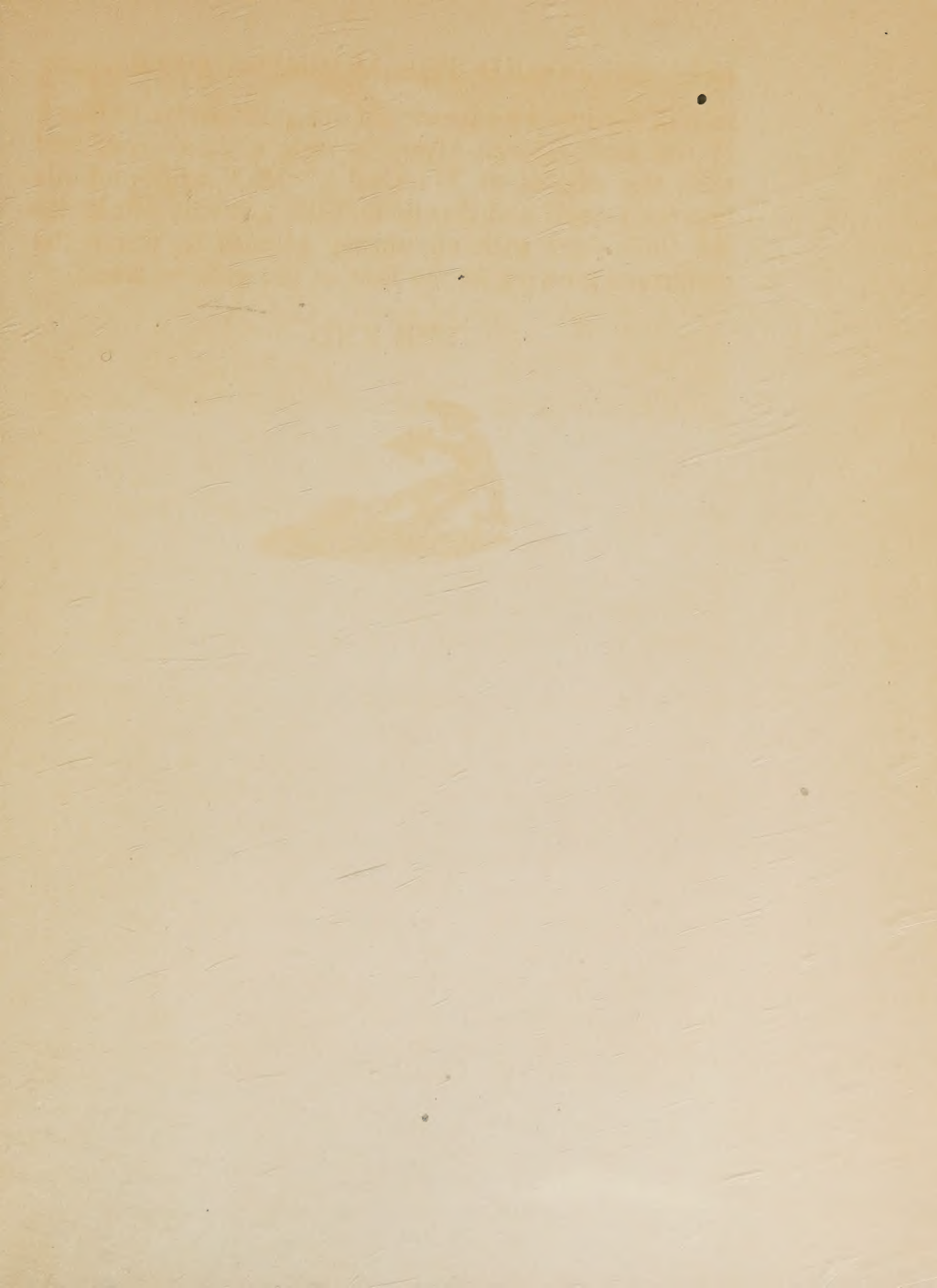
Yonder on Mother Ocean the *Morning Star*, with a new master, continues her tradition. The black flag is flying from her mizzen masthead, and for the gentle-



men of fortune who sprawl on the quarterdeck to speak of the past, George Merry is only a detail confused with the whores of Maracaibo, old Nantes and his negress, myself and this little, little girl who plucks up her pink skirt with an uneasy gesture to water the mandrake growing at the foot of the gallows tree.

## THE END







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